



HISTORY

revisited

Step through a time portal in the heart of Dubai and discover a legacy of the late Shaikh Rashid at Majalis Ghorfat Umm Al Sheif



Brian Salter

Even despite the recent slow down in Dubai's real estate construction boom, it is often difficult for people to remember just how much the place has changed in the past few years. A trip to the very heart of Jumeirah could, however, prove to be a welcome reminder to the majority of Dubai's residents, many of whom are totally unaware that just one dirham could be their passport to experience what life was like half a century ago.

Majalis Ghorfat Umm Al Sheif is one of the most important historical buildings in Dubai; yet to see the cars whizzing past the old brown sign pointing into Jumeirah's suburbs, one would wonder how many of their occupants would know that.

Built in 1955, it was the summer residence of the late Shaikh Rashid Bin Saeed Al Maktoum, father of today's modern city, and whose vision pulled Dubai from relative obscurity towards the 21st century. It was his idea to open a new port at Jebel Ali, ignoring opposition from his advisers and it was he who saw to the dredging of the Creek, allowing for the passage of bigger boats and further boosting trade in the city.

Although it has been extensively restored, the building retains much of its old charm. Apart from being the summer retreat of the royal family, the majalis used to be an important meeting house for the people in the run up to independence.

Shaikh Rashid presided over these meetings in



the main hall which was especially adapted to provide respite from the summer heat by way of large shuttered windows.

Majalis Ghorfat Umm Al Sheif was constructed — in the traditional style of the period before the oil boom changed the entire face of the region — of gypsum and coral rocks as well as date palm fronds, and was named after the Umm Al Sheif fishing banks, famous for their natural pearls.

Built over two stories in a 14m x 5.7m building, it has many air inlets in its walls and is surrounded by the remains of a date palm plantation.

The ground floor comprises an open liwan (or terraced verandah) with a storeroom on the northern flank beside it, and an outside staircase leads to the second storey. Here, we find a wide liwan leading in to the main majalis room, which is one of the most delightful examples of its kind, looking much as it would have done in Shaikh Rashid's day. The building was used temporarily as a police station in the 1960s, but it was extensively

restored back to its former elegance.

Although the Ghorfat Umm Al Sheif used to be a date palm farm, the traditional garden within its grounds has been much added to by the Dubai Municipality, although it is none the worse for that. Featuring not just palm trees, but lemon and olive trees as well, there are winding falaj irrigating channels that give out the soothing sound of running water as the visitor strolls lazily through the grounds. Visiting birds, too, appreciate the calm serenity and can be seen paddling in the running water and flitting from palm to palm.

All in all, it's an absolute gem of a place, both totally out of character with the rest of the area, yet fitting in beautifully with its surroundings.

To get there: Take the Jumeirah Road northbound from the Burj Al Arab towards Deira; and look out for the brown tourist sign pointing to your right, up Street 17, just before you reach Jumeirah Beach Park. Open seven days a week, entrance to the grounds is just Dh1.

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The return of the cold diva

'Queen of Mandopop' Faye Wong to do a series of concerts in Beijing and Shanghai

The woman widely regarded as the 'Queen of Mandopop' is making a long-awaited comeback with a limited series of concerts in Beijing and Shanghai in October and November, six years after her last release.

The almost effortlessly cool Faye Wong has sold millions of albums and won fans across Asia, with songs ranging from the heart-rending early hit *Easily Hurt Woman* to the ersatz, Buddhist-inspired trip-hop of her 2000 album *Fable*.

The entertainment pages of Chinese Internet portals were dominated last week by pictures of Wong at a brief Beijing news conference to announce her return, many simply carrying the headline 'The Diva Is Back.'

Her popularity shows little sign of fading, with advanced sales for the 10 concerts of her comeback tour — five each in Beijing and Shanghai — reaching 18.88 million yuan (\$2.79 million) in only 10 days.

Famous for her icy demeanor, Wong, 40, had more or less withdrawn from the limelight five years ago to concentrate on her charity, set up to help children born with cleft lips and palates, as her second daughter was.

Counting even Taiwan President



Ma Ying-Jeou as a fan, Wong is also famous for her hit Chinese-language covers of tracks by The Cranberries, Tori Amos and the Cocteau Twins. Outside of Asia, she is perhaps best known for her occasional film roles, including in Wong Kar-wai's award-winning *Chungking Express*.

—Reuters

Auctions flog celebrity oddities



OLD IS GOLD: Elvis Presley's white piano in his music room in his Graceland home is up for sale next month. Photos: AFP

Pianos played on by Elvis and The Beatles, a Duke's bric-a-brac and dino skeletons all go under the hammer

Elvis Presley's gleaming white Knabe grand piano, and the coffee-stained piano played by the Beatles and Pink Floyd, are up for sale in separate auctions on either side of the Atlantic next month.

Presley's piano, which was in the music room at his Graceland home from 1957 to 1969, may fetch more than \$1million at Heritage Auction Galleries' Memphis sale on August 14. The Knabe was the house piano at Ellis Auditorium, Memphis, where Duke Ellington, Count Basie and others performed,

before Presley bought it and refurbished it in white.

The cigarette-burned Challen, used in the 1960s at Abbey Road Studios in north London, is expected to fetch as much as £150,000.

The Challen piano cost £250 in 1964, according to the book *Recording the Beatles* by Brian Kehew and Kevin Ryan. The Beatles probably used it in 1966 for the track *Tomorrow Never Knows* on the *Revolver* album, and by Paul McCartney for the 1969 song *Old Brown Shoe*.

Churchill's Teeth

A partial set of dentures used by Winston Churchill is being sold this week by an auction house in Norfolk. The gold-mounted upper false teeth, one of three sets designed to mask a lisp, are being offered by Keys Auctioneers with an estimate of £4,000 to £5,000. Another set



DENTURE-WEARING HERO: Winston Churchill's partial set of dentures are being sold by an auction house in Norfolk.

of dentures was buried with Churchill, and a third is in the museum of the UK's Royal College of Surgeons.

Devonshire's Store

The Duke of Devonshire is the latest English aristocrat looking to raise funds by clearing storerooms of his home — hopefully at least £2.5 million from an auction at Sotheby's. The three-day Chatsworth attic sale, scheduled for October 5 to 7, includes furnishings from various properties that have been stored at the Devonshires' ancestral house in Derbyshire. The event, in classic attic-auction style, will also feature

lots such as ceramics and glass, temptingly valued at as little as £20.

Dinosaur Skeleton

For those who aren't content with the stars' pianos, a Duke's chimneypiece or Churchill's teeth, how about a dinosaur's bones?

Sotheby's is to offer the Allosaurus remains in a Paris sale on October 5. The skeleton is 33 feet (10 metres) in length, and it is estimated it will fetch about €300,000 (\$1.02 million), the US-based auction house said in an e-mail.

—Bloomberg